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“Try Not to Giggle if You Can Help It”: The implementation of experiential instructional techniques in social studies classrooms[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined how social studies teachers implemented experiential instructional techniques by closely analyzing videotaped lessons taught over four years in third through 12th grade classrooms across 16 school districts. Data analysis indicated that of the 438 lessons, only 14 involved experiential instructional techniques, and their implementation generally failed to reflect the potential benefits of this instructional approach. Twelve of the experiential exercises (a) lacked a clear instructional purpose related to the content; (b) did reflect an instructional purpose, but it was ultimately thwarted by the activity's unanticipated dynamism; or (c) encouraged the development of significant misconceptions about the content, while one of the two lessons without these problems demonstrated the strategy's use for reinforcement of factual recall rather than critical thinking. Implications for social studies education research and practice are considered.

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Introduction

The efficacy and appropriateness of experiential instructional techniques in social studies remain an issue of debate. The empirical literature on these techniques, which include simulations, role-plays, and re-enactments, lacks consensus on how to define these strategies individually or as a group (Aldrich, 2009; Crookall, 2010; Wright-Maley, 2015). Referred to in empirical literature as “simulations and other experiential learning activities” (Wright-Maley, 2014a, p. 18) and in practitioner-oriented literature as “experiential exercises” (Teachers' Curriculum Institute (TCI), 2010, p. 46) or “theatric strategies” (Larson & Keiper, 2011, p. 190), this category of techniques is generally viewed to provide students with

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opportunities to experience key concepts firsthand through active participation in a performance-based activity surrounding a real-life occurrence (Larson & Keiper, 2011; TCI, 2010).¹

While the literature identifies many potential benefits of experiential instructional techniques, such as improved engagement, appreciation of varied perspectives, and critical thinking and analysis (e.g., Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013; Larson & Keiper, 2011; Stephens, Feinberg, & Zack, 2013; TCI, 2010), it also points to numerous potential drawbacks to their implementation. These include the possibility that students will lead the exercise in unanticipated directions that conflict with the instructional purpose, fail to reach deeper understanding of the content, or decline to participate in an engaged way (e.g., Larson & Keiper, 2011; TCI, 2010). Furthermore, use of these techniques in history instruction may present significant risks of trivializing tragic events (e.g., Laqueur, 1994; Schweber, 2003, 2004).

Little empirical literature has examined social studies teachers' classroom practice involving experiential instructional techniques. The limited research in this area often focuses on case studies of exemplary practices (e.g., DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012; Schweber, 2003) or the strategies' frequency of use (e.g., Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013; Stephens et al., 2013; Thieman & Carano, 2013). Researchers have not yet explored in depth the ways in which individual social studies teachers, who are not selected for participation in a study based on exemplary instruction, actually implement experiential exercises in their regular practice. This exploratory study addresses that gap.

Defining experiential instructional techniques

Experiential learning has been a focus of scholarship in curriculum and instruction for the past century. In the early twentieth century, Dewey advocated for students to be given the freedom to play active rather than passive roles in learning through experiences that connected to their lives, believing that students should have a sense of purpose in their learning and that teachers should influence the direction of that purpose through their instructional approaches (1938/1997). Building on the work of Dewey (1938/1997) and Lewin (1942/1951) decades later, Kolb (1984) proposed an experiential learning theory that conceived of learning as a process of knowledge-creation through experience. The experiential learning cycle he theorized involves four learning modes (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2008). The first is concrete experience, which leads to the modes of reflection and observation, thinking about abstract concepts and their implications for action, and actively testing those implications through experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2008). Kolb (1984) proposed that learning occurred as a result of the creative tension existing among the four modes in response to a particular context.

The models of learning advanced by the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Kolb reflect the theory of constructivism, involving the belief that deep learning occurs when students create knowledge through their own experiences, rather than a transmission model viewing knowledge as conveyed from one person who possess it to another who does not (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). While these theories apply to learning in any context, they have unique meaning in school, where the experiences through which students learn are generally highly structured by educators. When teaching through an instructional approach grounded in constructivism, a tension therefore exists: a teacher aims to provide experiences through which students can create knowledge for themselves but must design those experiences within the constraints of a classroom setting.

The powerful teaching practices advocated in the social studies community reflect similar underlying beliefs, as The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) demonstrated in a recent position paper:

There is a profound difference between learning about the actions and conclusions of others and reasoning one's way toward those conclusions...Student construction of meaning is facilitated by clear explanation, modeling, and interactive discourse...and [students] participate in compelling projects that call for critical thinking. Powerful social studies teachers develop and/or expand repertoires of engaging, thoughtful teaching strategies for lessons that allow students to analyze content in a variety of learning modes. (2008, *Qualities of Power and Authentic Social Studies* section, para. E)

This statement emphasizes students making meaning of content through their own reasoning and teachers using strategies that provide opportunities to engage in analysis and critical thinking. Rather than transmitting knowledge from teacher to student, this view conceives of the social studies teacher's role as thoughtfully selecting instructional strategies to support students' construction of knowledge.

One category of such pedagogical tools in social studies involves instructional strategies that provide students with opportunities to engage with key concepts through participation in a performance-based activity about a real-world experience. The empirical literature about these pedagogical tools, including simulations, role-plays, and re-enactments, lacks consensus on how to define these strategies individually (Aldrich, 2009; Crookall, 2010; Wright-Maley, 2015), and it does not provide a collective name or definition for this group of strategies. For example, in writing for academic audiences, Wright-Maley (2014a) has referred to the group as "simulations and other experiential learning activities" (p. 18) and a "family of related concepts" (p. 12). In contrast, practitioner-oriented literature does offer collective names for these techniques, calling them "experiential exercises" (Teachers' Curriculum Institute [TCI], 2010) or "theatric strategies"

¹ This definition is limited to strategies used in face-to-face classroom teaching. It does not encompass virtual experiences such as computer simulations. Our sample included no lessons involving computer simulations.

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